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ABSTRACT

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The Symbolic Structures and Dynamics of Settings in Qualitative Educational Research

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Abstract for

The Symbolic Structures and Dynamics of Settings

in Qualitative Educational Research

Drawing on diverse perspectives, this paper examines six lenses on settings that offer a more complex picture of their role in lived experiences than is often available in traditional analyses and reports of qualitative educational research. This discussion focuses on some of the social and cultural signifiers implicit in particular settings and in moves from one setting into another. The premise developed is that a deeper analysis of settings requires an unraveling of relations among people and the settings in which they participate as well as inquiry into characteristics that particularize those settings. These lenses are not meant to be inclusive but to suggest questions and analyses that may yield fresh perspectives on the roles of settings in people's lives. In this discussion, setting is defined as a bounded environment in which particular situations, interactions, and behaviors accrue to it as normal by virtue of history, cultural values, and beliefs.

The Symbolic Structures and Dynamics of Settings in Qualitative Educational Research

Qualitative research often draws on diverse perspectives to offer more complex representations of participants as they reason, learn, and interact within various contexts. What Geertz (1973) called "thick description" includes detailed accounts of social and cultural contexts that shape and are shaped by participants. According to Geertz, "Understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity" (p. 14). Likewise, understanding settings from participants' perspectives may reveal what they regard as normal in an environment and help a researcher develop a fuller account of their interactions and behaviors. The primary premise developed here is that a deeper analysis of settings requires an unraveling of multiple perspectives on the symbolic structures and dynamics of settings. A second premise is that inquiry into the perspectives that researchers and participants hold about familiar settings such as schools can reveal a richer picture of teaching, learning, and lived experiences.

Terms such as context, site, and environment are often used to describe settings. However, setting offers a more specific conception of the ideas represented here than environment, site, or context. Site is closely linked with traditional quantitative report formats and connotes a briefly described, generic physical location (a point discussed later in this paper) that is usually devoid of the richer conceptions and representations associated with qualitative methods. Context is also problematic, as Rex, et al. (1998) noted in a review of literacy journal articles, because it lacks a clear or coherent meaning in much educational research. Although environment is more satisfactory, used alone it suggests a general location or space that lacks clear boundaries.

For this discussion, setting is defined as a bounded environment in which particular situations, interactions, and behaviors accrue to it as normal by virtue of history, cultural values, and beliefs. Thus settings are more than physical locations (although given settings

have physical features) and are distinguished by the symbolic meanings associated with them. Primary institutions of society such as schools, museums, and churches are examples of strongly bounded settings, but others such as neighborhood basketball courts and particular areas where regular social interactions take place over extended time may be included as well. The space, although physical, is inscribed with social and cultural messages that define boundaries as well as requirements for entry and participation.

Settings, in contrast to general contexts, are bounded as physical and symbolic environments and distinguished by regular iterations of particular rituals, discourses, and expectations. Through processes of naming, rituals, and relations with other settings, a setting is sustained as a bounded environment by participants. Settings, in this sense, may include smaller, nested environments that have their own bounds. As Paley (1979) so beautifully illustrated, one corner of her primary school classroom, the "doll corner," is defined as a particular place by its rich social and cultural interactions, rules for who may participate, and rules for the kinds of play that take place there. This environment, according to Paley, "reveals some of the most sophisticated fantasy play in the kindergarten," a place where "play begins to probe the personalities of children" and "the structure of the family [is] examined" (p. 88). It is also a place that had a hierarchy, albeit a changing one. Paley noted, "There was a doll corner in-group. There always is" (p. 87).

In nearly every setting, as Paley (1979) discovered with the doll corner social interactions and positions are both constructed and maintained by participants. Such settings foster, according to Nelson (1996), far more than social skills in children:

> Children in a modern culture enter a world organized by symbolic forms. They are surrounded by cultural artifacts from the beginning of life. . . . The child's clothes, furniture, the very spaces of the home reflect aspects of cultural institutions—social, economic, educational. . . . A home furnished with books and magazines not only provides the child with specific cultural experiences and

opportunities but also establishes a particular status within the community at large. (p. 92-93)

However, neither children nor adults are often conscious of the social and cultural significations of familiar settings or how particular environments shape their activities or ways of thinking (Wertsch, 1985). The same may be said of researchers who enter familiar settings, especially institutions such as schools where they may have been socialized in their early years. Prior experiences can make a setting all but transparent to participants and researchers. "Going native" (Gold, 1958) occurs when researchers become so immersed in a group or culture as participants that they lose the ability to step back and consciously reflect on and question events and interactions. Being a native presents similar, if not greater, difficulties.

Contributing to the transparency of settings is the traditional format for reporting data in many research journals. This format calls for four distinct parts: introduction, method, results, and discussion (American Psychological Association, 1994). Data on settings is usually relegated to a brief description of the research site(s) in the methods section. This perfunctory format minimizes the significance of settings in the lives of participants. It also forces a separation of data that Geertz (1973) considered inextricably connected: "Culture is not a power, something to which social events, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is thickly—described" (p. 14). The following section looks at diverse areas of scholarship that, in the past two decades, have focused on the social and cultural settings that shape teaching and learning.

Theories on Settings in the Social Sciences

Researchers in fields such as sociolinguistics and cognitive and cultural psychology have articulated the need for careful analysis of settings, both past and present. Cole (1996), for example, called for a "more inclusive analysis" of culturally mediated cognition that focuses on the interwoven, qualitative relationships that develop between individuals

and their environments (p. 130). Bruner (1990) argued that studies in cultural psychology should meet two requirements: "One of them is that such studies must focus upon meanings in terms of which Self is defined both by the individual and by the culture in which he or she participates. . . . The second requirement . . . is to attend to the practices in which the 'meanings of Self' are achieved and put to use" (p. 116). The larger focus in this field is not just on what is happening but on why it happens in a particular place, or what Bruner called "contexts of practice" (p. 118) and how settings are mediated through the practices and beliefs of participants.

In recent years, research in psychology and learning theory has examined social and cultural environments to better understand participants' perspectives and behaviors (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989; Rogoff, 1990). Theories on situated cognition and learning emerged as a result of work in cultural psychology that situated learning and thought processes in particular social and cultural contexts (Cole, 1996; Nelson, 1996).

"Activity settings" or the contexts in which human beings learn, according to cognitive psychologists (e.g., Eckensberger & Meacham, 1984; Wertsch, 1985), provide particular cognitive tools for thinking and learning. Wertsch (1985) noted that "the general issue of the relationship between activity settings and mental processes has only recently begun to receive serious interest in Western psychology" (p. 216). Cognitive psychologists are concerned not only with the activities that take place within settings but also with how participants mediate those settings and activities through their use of cognitive tools.

Settings are as complex as the interactions that take place within and around them. They are constructed not only by participants but also by other settings, both past and present. Sarason (1997) proposed that "any one behavior setting is inevitably connected with other behavior settings" (p. 179). To understand a setting, he reasoned, one must understand its history as well as related settings that have an impact on the behaviors,

feelings, and discourses of its participants. This concept was the focus of ethnographic research on schools and Hispanic communities in Arizona, where Moll et al. (1992) used the concept of "funds of knowledge" to illustrate the potential of tapping into home knowledge to inform learning in school.

Sociolinguists and cultural psychologists interested in literacy have realized the importance of social and cultural settings in the development of discourse practices among different groups of people. Heath (1983/1994) showed how home settings shaped literacy practices in her longitudinal study of two working class communities in the Carolinas. Specific connections between language learning and home and community settings emerged in her richly detailed accounts of the talk that took place in kitchens, on front porches, in churches, and on the playgrounds of two working class communities. The problem for the children of these communities was that the social and discourse practices of their home and community settings differed from those of the "mainstreamers" whose literacy practices most closely aligned with those valued in school settings.

Since Heath's study, a number of studies in literacy and sociolinguistics (e.g., Finders, 1997; Fordham, 1993; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983/1994; Moll et al., 1992) have demonstrated the importance of intersections among home, community, and school settings. This research has consistently found that literacy practices that take place in particular settings signify identity (Scollon & Scollon, 1995) and power (Gee, 1996) as well as ways of understanding the world (Cole, 1996; Nelson, 1996; Scribner & Cole, 1981).

In subsequent studies of discourse practices, especially those that focus on social and cultural discrepancies between home and school (e.g., Gee, 1996; Michaels, 1981; Shuman, 1986), the complex influence of settings and the implications of movements across settings is especially evident. Analyses of discourses can reveal much about how outsiders negotiate unfamiliar or culturally dissonant settings and how both insiders and outsiders construct ways for negotiating settings. Outsiders sometimes develop what Gee

(1996) called "borderland discourses" (p. 162) that are constructed by those who are between two settings, negotiating "spaces between the Discourses of school and . . . home- and community-based Discourses" (p. 162). It is important to understand not only how individuals are positioned in one setting but also how they view themselves in relation to the multiple settings in which they participate.

Analyzing Symbolic Constructions of Settings through Six Lenses

At one level, analysis can reveal the overt structures and artifacts of settings, but perhaps not enough for a researcher to fully understand the perspectives and behaviors of participants. As Geertz (1973) noted, data "are really our constructions of other people's constructions," layers of constructed realities that he described as "winks upon winks upon winks" (p. 9). He proposed that analysis must consist of "sorting out the structures of signification" (p. 9).

A deeper analysis of settings requires an unraveling of relations among participants and settings as well as critical inquiry into characteristics that particularize those relations. The discussion below focuses on six lenses for examining the symbolic constructions and dynamics of settings. These are not meant to be inclusive but to suggest questions and analyses that may yield fresh perspectives on the relationships among multiple settings and on how they shape and are shaped by participants.

Histories of Settings

Histories of settings, as Sarason (1997) noted, are crucial in understanding existing structures and discourses. How have ritualized events or behaviors have evolved over time? What past events have transformed a setting? How have power structures and particular discourses have been established and maintained? How does the history of a setting intersect with histories of other settings?

Discourses and power relations evolve over time and become deeply embedded in a setting. Gee (1992) proposed that individuals are conduits for larger, historical discourses:

> It is sometimes helpful to say that it is not individuals who speak and act, but rather historically and socially defined discourses speak to each other through individuals. The individual instantiates, gives body to, a discourse every time he acts or speaks and thus carries it, and ultimately changes it, through time. (p. 23)

Histories of settings are intertwined with the histories of those who participate in them. Discourses emerge from particular settings and accumulate social or political meanings in connection with that shared history. Even in much-changed present-day forms, discourses may retain vestiges of older settings and power relations. A good example exists in the IRE (Initiation, Response, Evaluation) discourse that Cazden (1988) and others have identified as prevalent in most classrooms. This pattern of discourse emerged from early European school settings where rote learning and recitation affirmed the power of the teacher to control both knowledge and behavior. The structures of IRE discourse also represent a view that knowledge is acquired through memorization and recitation. As Cazden noted, "One pervasive feature of the content of teacher talk is the expression of control—control of behavior and of talk itself" (1988, p. 160).

The history of a setting, especially from participants' perspectives, can explain current decisions and actions. Agee (2000, in press) found that the perspectives of a high school English teacher on selecting texts were shaped by prior events in her school's history:

> We have had incredible attacks in the past five years on some books, and they have come from a very small group of local minority in the district. And this is a nation-wide. . . . And so, you know, we felt, "Oh, well, we're not going to let them bother us." They made so much noise, caused so much trouble, that I watched everybody, from the top down--superintendent, curriculum director--all the way down, people froze, and self-censorship was the worst outcome of that.

These divisive public events several years before had long-term effects on teachers, students, and administrators. They also reflected intersections with the community

history. The school was located in a fast-growing suburb that had once been farmland. Demographic changes manifested themselves in taxes, political campaigns, and school policies. When a teacher chose a text for students, it was a political act.

Present settings are constructed through accretions of past events, beliefs about what kinds of behavior and knowledge are important, and symbolic iterations. Gaining knowledge of the history of a setting and participants' perspectives on that history broadens and enriches qualitative inquiries.

Boundedness and Permeability of Settings

The bounds of a setting, as perceived by insiders and outsiders, and its degree of permeability can be useful in analyzing a setting. Boundedness, or those characteristics that define a setting as particular and distinct from others, can be clarified with three questions: (1) What behaviors, discourses, and rituals do insiders characterize as normal or abnormal in a setting? (2) What normal or ritualized pathways exist for entering or exiting? (3) What obstacles control entry?

Preserving normalcy is generally important to insiders and may include maintaining power structures and discourses to achieve their purposes (Williams, 1989). Insiders control what kinds of individuals, behaviors, or kinds of discourse are acceptable or unacceptable, i.e., abnormal or out of bounds for a particular setting. Playing a game of poker or swearing in a church or temple would be out of bounds for those who interpret such settings as sacred and who identify poker and swearing as profane behaviors.

School settings are bounded in both obvious and less obvious ways. Those bounds, sometimes covert, are marked by what is considered normal and appropriate by all participants (students might have different views than administrators or teachers). Expecting students to sit quietly in chairs or desks for a large portion of the day, if considered normal, has serious consequences for those who will not or cannot conform. Some are punished; others are medicated with Ritalin® or other prescription drugs. If

these expectations are central in a particular school setting, teachers and administrators may focus on management rather than on learning.

The bounds of a setting also define the degree of permeability for outsiders. Generally public settings are more permeable than private ones. Anyone who is the right age and lives in a particular neighborhood may enter a public school as a student. In contrast, entry requirements make private schools far less permeable. Some private school requirements are overt, e.g., successful entry depends upon test scores or parents or guardians having enough money for tuition, books, uniforms, and a variety of other fees. Covert requirements, such as a lack of public transportation to the school or a lack of resources for physically disabled or special education students, may present substantive obstacles that are passive screening mechanisms. Although these requirements might appear to be reasonable from insiders' perspectives, they establish boundaries that make entry difficult or impossible for children who are poor, disabled, or whose family situations do not permit participation.

Successful entry and participation ironically require some knowledge of the behaviors and discourses critical for acceptance in a new setting. However, even those who have some prior knowledge of a setting may find their knowledge inadequate for successful entry, participation, or full understanding of interactions and events, especially if their own characteristics or beliefs conflict with those of insiders. In a study of adolescents' storytelling, Shuman (1986) found that "certain kinds of knowledge identified group membership" and "those who were affiliated supposedly shared knowledge, and to admit ignorance was to admit being an outcast." Moreover, "denying someone information was a way to deny them membership" (p. 171).

The boundedness of settings, then, is multi-layered. An analysis of internal structures in a setting may reveal degrees of permeability for particular participants. To be in a setting does not insure membership. Those who are perceived as outsiders because of

race, gender, or social class may encounter a series of internal obstacles in a setting as many studies have shown (e.g., Finders, 1997; Fine, 1993; Oakes, 1985).

Following the Supreme Court decision of 1954 barring racial discrimination, the ideal currently represented by public education in America is education and opportunity for all. As Goodlad (1984) said of late twentieth century American schools: "Equality and quality are the name of the game" (p. 45). However, even in public schools that ideal is often subverted by ability tracking or social groupings that discourage full participation for certain groups or individuals. Scholars who have examined the school experiences of African American students (e.g., Banks, 1994; Delpit, 1996; Fordham, 1993), non-native speakers (e.g., Moll et al., 1992), or poor and non-mainstream students (e.g., Kozol, 1992; Rose, 1989) have noted a variety of internal obstacles in schools. Such obstacles often undermine effective instruction, learning, and social participation (not only in school but also in the larger society) for many students.

Examining covert obstacles to participation can yield surprising findings. In Finders' (1997) study of adolescent girls, the group identified as the "tough cookies" because of their poor, working class homes knew how school worked and practiced quiet compliance to please their teachers, but practiced resistance as well. They could not successfully participate in a constructivist school where their difference might be revealed and ridiculed in collaborative activities. Their socioeconomic status and their home values set them apart from the "social queens" and from the major social events of the school. They could not afford to buy yearbooks, and their occasional attempts to befriend the "social queens" were rebuffed. Teachers saw the "tough cookies" as nice, quiet students. Ironically their invisibility in this setting was masked by the school's expectations for compliance. Finders concluded that these girls were caught in a double bind: "The cookies worked to manipulate the institutional expectations to protect themselves from self-disclosure" yet they also had a compelling reason for staying in school. They were looking "to education . . . to help them find a better place in society" (p. 125).

Covert bounds also exist in the expectations of insiders, especially those in powerful positions. Shuman (1986) found that teachers' use of worksheets in a high school with a diverse student population had the effect of controlling knowledge, behavior, and authentic authorship in writing. Worksheets dominated the curriculum, and according to Shuman set up bounds at many levels. In this setting, the practice of using worksheets silenced students' voices and stories: "The person who fills in the form is not the author but rather the instrument of completion" (p. 101).

Understanding how participants, both insiders and outsiders, construct and perceive bounds of settings, suggest questions that reveal signifying structures. What behaviors, discourses, or attributes signify membership or alienation? What kinds of routines silence or give voice to particular groups or individuals? How are participants viewed by insiders when they move from one setting into another?

Movement Across Settings

Exploring the significance of a participant's movement from one setting into another may add an important dimension to analysis. Perspectives on the status of settings and what they symbolize can be especially revealing. For an individual to deliberately move from a setting regarded by a society as normal to one that is regarded as risky and even life threatening reveals different perspectives on risk and mortality. The degree of acceptance from society often rests upon the status of the settings and the rewards for participants.

To question status and conceptions of normalcy in one setting such as school, it is often useful to examine the perspectives of insiders and outsiders on movement to or from that setting as well as other settings. Perspectives on such movements can suggest the values and beliefs assigned by individuals to particular settings as well as the significance certain moves hold for participants (and for the researcher).

In a study of students moving from a progressive middle school to a traditional high school, Wells (1996) characterized the middle school as a community:

> There didn't have to be a lot of rules because people knew what they were supposed to do, and their motivation for doing what was right didn't depend on threats of punishments or extrinsic rewards. It depended more on a desire to fit within the community, to maintain relationships that were integral to it. (p. 171)

In contrast, the structure of the high school discouraged community: "Without a strong sense of community and with schoolwork that students considered boring, it was only natural that issues of control dominated behaviors" (p. 174). Wells brought to these data her own ideas as well as those of the students about what was normal and what was "right." From Wells' perspective, moving from a student-centered middle school to a teacher/content-centered high school was confusing and difficult for many students. The perspectives of researcher and students on each of these settings revealed particular expectations and values

Questioning the patterns of movement of individuals or groups across settings may yield surprising findings. Why is movement across some settings less remarkable from the perspectives of the researcher, participants, or the larger society? Who are the groups or individuals who possess the ability to move freely among multiple settings? Where would participants rather be or where do they hope to be?

Movement across mainstream settings is often seen as unremarkable and even desirable in American society. However, in studies of poor, non-mainstream, or minority groups, participants are represented as having few options and as operating in tightly bounded settings with few options for movement into settings that might provide them with social or economic opportunities. As Heath (1983/1994) noted, "for both black and white mainstream families, social interactions center not on their immediate neighborhoods, but on voluntary associations across the city and region" (pp. 240-241). In contrast, the residents of Trackton, a working class African American mill community, seldom ventured outside their neighborhood unless it was necessary. Heath noted that the women of Trackton had little access to reliable transportation. With no public bus service, "they had

to find friends or relatives to help 'carry' them places in case of emergency or dire need" (p. 54). However they saw this neighborhood setting as temporary: "Soon we be gettin' on, movin' to a place our own, 'n be gone from dis run-down place" (p. 57).

Heath's analysis of Trackton and the belief of its residents that they were moving to another setting at some point in the future made clear why they did not to spend money on the exteriors of their homes. Readers understand far more about the residents of Trackton than a cursory description of their "run-down" homes would have allowed. Such a view would have only reproduced stereotypical notions about race and class. A deeper probing revealed an imagined setting of a "better place" that existed just as firmly for some of the residents as did the "real" setting of Trackton. Questioning movement or perspectives on movement across settings (or obstacles to movement) is critical to understanding not only participants' positions in these settings but also how they view themselves in relation to possibilities for participating in other settings.

Examining the conditions or consequences for moving from one setting to another often reveals cultural assumptions about those who make such moves. For example, students who "drop out" of school, as the terminology suggests, tend to become invisible in that setting and perhaps in the larger culture as well. To be a dropout signifies a deficiency or lapse in character or judgment in many contexts. As Stevenson and Ellsworth (1993) noted, "The popular image of dropouts as deviant delegitimates their voices and therefore effectively silences their critique of schooling" (p. 260). To drop out of school, the military, or a mainstream religious organization often signifies an inability to participate in a meaningful or normal way in society because the settings themselves have accrued such powerful images in American culture.

The social status assigned to settings is important when analyzing moves among them. Movement across settings tends to be more remarkable when an individual makes a move from a low-status setting into a high-status setting because of the extreme difficulties that arise with such a move. Rose (1989) documented the struggles of his move from a

poor barrio in Los Angeles to a university setting. Belenky et al. (1986) found that women who had come from poor or abusive home settings had difficulty moving into a college setting: "Some women were so consumed with self-doubt that they found it difficult to believe a teacher's praise, especially when the teacher was a man. . . . The women worried that professors who praised their minds really desired their bodies" (p. 197).

Discovering multiple perspectives on moves across settings usually reveals very different views. For example, the larger society may view social workers as caring, self-sacrificing individuals, but the people they serve may see them as threatening their parental rights, privacy, or need money for food and housing. Understanding these perspectives on movement is critical to framing qualitative studies that seek to represent participants' experiences beyond one setting.

Variability of Settings

The degree of variability in a setting reveals much about the ways in which power relations and discourses are maintained and what practices participants view as normal. Is a setting open to change or variation? What strategies are used to maintain structures, power relations, and rituals? What degree of variability is tolerated? What represents a tipping point, a point where participants perceive change or variability as signifiers of chaos or threat?

The institutions of a culture preserve basic beliefs and customs and are often the least variable and most resistant to change. The maintenance of tradition is essential to the culture and those who participate as members. According to Bruner (1996), cultures are "composed of institutions that specify more concretely what roles people play and what status and respect these are accorded" (p. 29). Particular rituals and signifiers, for example, may be maintained through daily iterations of them and through symbolic representations that link them to the core values of a society. Displaying the American flag in front of schools and courthouses and in some cases in the chancel of a church (even with

the legal separation of church and state), pledging allegiance, and formal ties with the community through various organizations all represent mechanisms for maintenance.

Understanding participants' beliefs about variations or changes can reveal the ways in which the structures and discourses of the setting are maintained. Some research on preservice teachers (e.g., Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990), for example, found that concerns with maintaining order dominate early teaching experiences. Although researchers generally assign this concern to the inexperience of the preservice teacher, and inexperience does play some role, a deeper analysis might show that prior experience in schools and familiarity with representations of schools in media contributes to their concerns.

School teaches children more than content knowledge; they also learn in a school setting how to follow instructions from adults outside the family, to submit to authority, and to follow particular codes of conduct. Bruner (1996) noted that "what [school] teaches, what modes of thought and what 'speech registers' it actually creates in its pupils, cannot be isolated from how the school is situated in the lives and culture of its students" (p. 28). The primary concern, from a cultural view, is "how students experience [school]" and "what meaning they make of it" (Bruner, 1996, p. 29).

Maintaining order, it could be argued, is one of the missions of the institution of school. The ability of a teacher to maintain order is usually an explicit requirement for obtaining and keeping a teaching position. Nearly all assessment instruments used to gauge the effectiveness of teachers have at least one item that explicitly deals with the ability to control or manage students' behaviors. It is no surprise, then, to see researchers lament teachers' focus on management in some of the research on teacher change. Duffy and Roehler (1986) called for teachers to go "beyond management and task-engagement decisions and make substantive curricular and instructional decisions," but they admitted that "it is difficult to find such teachers in real classrooms, even after they have received training in how to make decisions" (p. 55).

Examining the degree and nature of variability in a setting can make clear what tolerance exists for change within the normalcy of a setting. In Britzman's (1991) case study of Jamie Owl, a preservice teacher, tolerance for variability becomes a central issue. In one instance, Jamie talked about being summoned to the principal's office following a parent complaint. She thought the complaint would be about her response to a student's question about the educational system when she had said schools should be abolished. However, the complaint indicated a very different concern that revealed one parent's view of normal content in an English classroom and much more:

> Mrs. Grettle was upset over an assignment I had given them, as far as paraphrasing Shakespeare. . . . I said to put Shakespeare into real English. And she was aghast because Shakespeare is real English. . . . Nothing about abolishing the school system. (p. 102)

As this incident shows, analyses of disruptions of normalcy in a single classroom setting may reveal much about the views and expectations of participants as well as those of the community and larger society.

Cultural Ecology of Settings

The cultural ecology of a setting includes intersections among diverse perspectives on particular settings as well as on proximal settings. How do insiders and outsiders view a setting? How do other related settings affect the target setting? It also includes the relationship between a setting and the larger society. How is this setting framed by the beliefs and values articulated in official documents or institutions of the larger society?

Diverse perspectives on a setting may reveal underlying sources of dissonance. For example, Finders' (1997) found that the "social queens" and the "tough cookies," as well as their parents and teachers, had very different views of school and its impact on students' lives. Finders' probing of interrelated settings revealed problematic conceptions of students and methods of instruction in school. For the "tough cookies," in particular,

constructivist teaching methods created situations that thrust them into high-risk positions. To survive, these young women practiced quiet resistance and deception.

Understanding the ecology of a setting also includes examining participants' and non-participants' ideas about what they consider routine or normal in a setting and what kinds of events or behaviors would constitute violations. These issues are often revealed in studies of preservice teachers experiences (e.g., Agee, 1998; Britzman, 1991). Their entry into a cooperating teacher's classroom often provokes interesting questions for researchers about tolerance for variability and what a school and a cooperating teacher perceive as normalcy.

A less studied aspect of settings is how participants and non-participants perceive time and its relationship to their positions, roles, and purposes. Newman, Griffin, and Cole (1996) found that time was a crucial element in teachers' thinking, a factor often ignored in the research: "A central resource for the teachers' decision making is the broad time frame that brackets their actions" (p. 76). Teachers knew what children had accomplished and "knew the curriculum . . . awaiting the children" (p. 76), a kind of knowing that contributed to a "dynamic assessment of learning" (p. 77). Probing the various conceptions of time among participants in a school setting often reveals subtler forms of dissonance and different philosophies on critical topics such as curriculum and instruction.

To fully understand the cultural ecology of a setting, it is important to know how participants see the relationship between that setting and the larger society. Agee (1999) found that experienced English teachers relied on their knowledge of the relationships among the school, the community, and the larger society in gauging their instructional effectiveness. Rogers (1997) also found this relationship important in her study of a teacher who broke with traditional teaching and invited her urban students to participate in critical inquiry as they read and discussed literary texts. Both the teacher and Rogers concluded that "this kind of teaching is not sanctioned by the larger culture of high schools

and by the norms for teaching reading or English in the United States" (p. 113). Examining a classroom or school setting by examining its relationship to larger social and cultural norms offers a much deeper understanding of its routines and participants.

Cultural Representations of Settings

The physical representations of institutions such as courts, churches, and schools are important in that they symbolize through concrete manifestations the maintenance of order and basic rituals of a culture. Hodder (2000) noted, "Ancient and modern buildings and artifacts, the intended and unintended residues of human activity, give alternative insights into the ways in which people perceived and fashioned their lives" (p. 705). Large physical plants, spires, stained glass windows, jury boxes, rows of desks, black or white boards, podiums, and artifacts such as gavels, and grade books represent order and power through the use of deeply embedded physical symbols. Most young children would be able to identify a room with rows of desks, a black board, and an American flag as a classroom. "A full sociological analysis cannot be restricted to interview data," Hodder argued: "It must also consider the material traces" (p. 705).

In making connections between a setting and the larger culture, it is sometimes useful to consider how that setting is represented in popular culture. In the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes, Calvin's comments on Miss Wormwood, the stodgy middle-aged teacher who appeared regularly in the strip, represented unofficial discourses that talked back to official discourses through parody and satire. Teachers in Peanuts had no identity; their voices appeared as an unintelligible drone in the background. Popular cartoon strips from Peanuts and Calvin and Hobbes to The Far Side and Fox Trot offer wonderfully humorous and incisive perspectives on schools and teachers. However, they also promote and sustain popular stereotypes. Similar parodies of schools and educators exist in movies like Ferris Bueller's Day Off, a stinging and irreverent depiction of schools that became a cult classic. Even movies that treat teachers with great ceremonious respect, such as Dead Poets' Society, depict a darker, repressive side of school settings. In essence,

representations of schools and teachers in popular culture offer researchers ways of framing and questioning official representations.

Exploring participants' own references to popular culture can offer a deeper understanding of their perspectives on school and on teachers. In a study by Gutierrez, Rhymes, and Larson (1995), students who were denied opportunities to enter into a dialogue with a social studies teacher because of his "monologic script" about the historic court case "Brown versus Board of Education" created an impromptu subversive discourse. Their "counterscript" referenced popular culture figures such as James Brown and Michael Jackson.

Much of the research on the role of cultural representation, especially that of popular culture, is included in the relatively new field of cultural studies. Using a cultural studies frame for examining settings and participants' experiences may help researchers make connections with larger social issues. In a review of cultural studies, Frow and Morris (2000) noted that one of the purposes of this kind of research is to "foreground the question of the relation between the description of the textual/cultural networks and the position of enunciation from which that description is possible" (p. 330). With increasing attention to the ways in which media and technology affect behavior and thinking, a cultural studies analysis can contribute a broader understanding of relationships among participants in particular settings and the larger society.

Conclusions

Unraveling the structures and signifying elements of settings has the potential to enrich findings and theorizing in qualitative educational research. Such analyses offer researchers ways of understanding the recursive and multi-layered nature of the environments in which people live and learn. An ecological approach, one that draws upon multiple paradigms and lenses, can help researchers construct a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of social and cultural experiences of participants. Moreover, discovering what participants, both insiders and outsiders, construe as normal may prompt researchers to

examine their own beliefs and the language they use to represent the lives and experiences of research participants.

Abu-Lughod (1991) argued against language that maintains objectivist classifications. Such language, she proposed, solidifies and reifies inequitable images of people who may, in fact, have very different perspectives. It is helpful to know that a high school is located in a particular region (mid-western, southern, northeastern, etc.) and that it serves an urban or suburban neighborhood. However, these descriptions often summon up embedded stereotypes that can work against fully understanding a school setting or its history in any meaningful way. The first condition of cultural theory, Geertz (1973) suggested, is its inseparability from "the immediacies thick description presents" and generality that "grows out of the delicacy of its distinctions, not the sweep of abstractions" (p. 25).

Just as Geertz (1973) argued for examining the particulars that distinguished a culture, Abu-Lughod (1991) argued for "ethnography of the particular" (p. 154) to break down the opacity of generic classifications such as social class or race. Although the use of such classification is common in educational research, it may work against any real understanding of the decisions, thoughts, and actions of participants. Analyzing settings as multi-layered and discursive, as evolving through individual and shared lived experience, has the potential to illuminate the subjectivities of participants and researchers.

Analysis of the histories, bounds, and relationships of settings not only reveals factors that influence participants' behaviors and discourses but also plays a role in theory building. Discovering multiple perspectives on particular settings, especially on requirements for entry and membership, can help a researcher develop theories about the mechanisms that position participants as insiders or outsiders in particular settings. Insights into the ecology of a setting can help one theorize about its relationship to the larger society.

Using the six lenses on settings described above may lead to a better understanding of the deep structures and signifiers embedded in settings and how they contribute to "practices in which the 'meaning of Self'" (Bruner, 1990, p. 116) is constructed. Examining the degree of boundedness and variability in a setting can provoke questions about participants' and researchers' conceptions and positions.

Geertz (1973) believed that the "whole point of a semiotic approach to culture . . . is to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the word, converse with them" (p. 24). In gaining that access, though, researchers' assumptions about what is "normal" or "right" in a setting, especially a familiar one, may close down possibilities for an analysis that questions and talks back to official representations and discourses. As Flick (1998) noted, qualitative research by its very nature draws on multiple perspectives and thereby enriches and strengthens inquiries on human experience. A more critical, insightful analysis of settings, one that draws on interrelated areas of theory and research, generates significant possibilities for conversations among researchers, participants, and educators.

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